

# **BLACK FIGHTING FORMATIONS:**

SEIZE  
THE  
TIME

**THEIR STRENGTHS,  
WEAKNESSES, and  
POTENTIALS**

EMORY

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Cover: “Seize the Time” by Emory Douglas

the general population, just like they had done to Field Marshal George Jackson. Most of them have sentences that make it unlikely that they will ever be released back into society. A campaign for their deportation to a foreign (African) country holds real possibilities that can serve as an organizing tool. There is much more that needs to be said about the lessons these Black fighting formations learned on a tactical level. However, that is another paper.

A study of the various Black political organizations in the United States between the years of 1960–1994 will reveal a number of “fighting formations.” These formations were usually subdivisions or offshoots of larger organizations, which were not primarily envisioned as combat groups. This lack of original dedication to a “fighting mission” will go a long way in helping to explain their strengths, weaknesses, and potentials.

Not included in this study are the nonpolitical Black fighting formations found among the street gangs or those dedicated to criminal activity. However, mention will be made of them in regard to the loss of potential that Black political fighting formations originally had.

We must look to Sun Tzu (ca. fifth century BC) and Karl Von Clausewitz (nineteenth century AD) for the most concise writings on the philosophy of warfare, the ultimate reasons for engaging in it and the main dynamics controlling its many variables. *The Art of War* (Sun Tzu) and *On War* (Von Clausewitz), are mentioned by military practitioners around the world as two of the best, tried and true, volumes available on the subject. There have been many outstanding military practitioners of African descent as well: Thutmose III (the first imperial conqueror), Ramses II and Ramses III (consistent subduers of the barbarian and savage hordes of Europe and Asia), Queens Nzinga and (the) Candace(s) of Angola and Ethiopia, Shaka Zulu (warrior par-excellence), and Toussaint L'Ouverture and Antonio Maceo (who out-led and out-fought vastly superior European armies in Haiti and Cuba). Finally, we must add the outstanding guerrilla leaders among the maroons and the African anti-colonial fighters. Although guerrilla warfare is often sufficient, it must be kept in mind that “guerrilla warfare” is only a subdivision of and sometimes a forerunner to “total war.” Despite the successes of these African warriors there is very little written work available about them and thus we must rely on the work of Sun Tzu and Karl Von Clausewitz.

Sun Tzu, in his *The Art of War*, instructs: “War is a matter of vital importance to the state. [It is] the province of life and death, [and] the

road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied.”<sup>1</sup> In *On War*, Karl Von Clausewitz states: “War is an extension of politics, politics by different means.”<sup>2</sup> Both of these authors demonstrate the connection between politics and warfare and the relative importance of both. (“Politics” here is simply the science and art of governing people.) It follows that those who are involved in shaping political affairs must recognize that they will, at some point, be required to pursue their political objectives “by different means” (Von Clausewitz) as “the road to survival or ruin” (Sun Tzu): warfare!

For the revolutionary, warfare cannot be a haphazard or belated consideration, as ignoring these principles (nonviolent pacifism) will ultimately lead to total destruction.

Therefore, all of our Black political organizations should have had a military component right from the beginning. From their inception it would have been the mission of these military components to study and prepare for war. This presupposes that the political and military leadership is sagacious enough to discern both the long-range interests of their people and the potential conflicts that they will invariably encounter by pursuing these interests. In other words, our Black political organizations should have known, right from the beginning, that they had to build a military component capable of defending our people from the attacks they were undergoing as a result of working to free themselves from oppression. Sadly, this was not the case.

In order to understand better what must be done now we need to learn from the mistakes of the past. When 1960 dawned, there were no Black fighting formations with the exception of the Nation of Islam’s paramilitary wing known as the Fruit of Islam. This was formed largely in response to Malcolm X’s tireless efforts. However, the Fruit of Islam was completely dedicated to internal security and static defense of the Nation of Islam’s leadership and property. It was further hobbled (in

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1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

2 (New York: Viking Press, 1983).

BLA member Assata Shakur was liberated in 1979 by a BLA task force which walked into the Clinton Prison in New Jersey and commandeered the visiting area. She later resurfaced in Cuba.

BLA member Kuwasi Balagoon escaped from a New Jersey state prison. He was part of the BLA task force that liberated Assata Shakur.

Arthur Cetawayo Johnson and Robert Saeed Joyner, two BLA members, took over a cellblock in the State Prison at Pittsburgh, PA, in 1979 in an attempt to escape. They and a few of the brothers, who had helped, were overpowered.

Russell Maroon Shoatz and Cliff Lumumba Futch escaped from a state mental hospital in PA in 1980. They and Phyllis Oshun Hill, who had smuggled them the escape weapons, were captured three days later after a gun battle with the police and FBI.

BLA member Sundiata Acoli and a number of other prisoners were almost killed in 1980–1981 when guards at the federal prison at Marion, IL, opened fire after they learned that they were trying to cut through the security fence.

BLA member Joseph Joe-Joe Bowen and three other brothers held guards at gunpoint for six days in 1981 after a failed escape at the State Prison at Graterford, PA. Joe-Joe and the BLA member Fred Muhammad Kafi Burton had assassinated the warden and deputy warden at the Holmesburg prison in Philadelphia in 1973.

There were many more incidents and the prison authorities dealt with them by keeping BLA members in the hole for five, ten, even fifteen years. BLA member Ruchell Cinque Magee (courthouse shootout and the San Quentin rebellion in which Jackson was killed) has spent most of his thirty years in the hole. The prison authorities cut them off from

groups. The BLA did attempt to reintegrate political workers who had left or been expelled from the BPP. Since most of these workers were located on the East Coast, they were known as the East Coast Panthers. This group did not have any of the same vitality, stature, resources, or connections that they had previously enjoyed, but they did have the know-how to put together a new political organization that could eclipse even the BPP by using aboveground recruiting from former Panthers and other political Blacks. In order to do this, they would have had to channel their energies and resources away from their armed activities while taking time to rebuild a political apparatus. Before the BLA guerrillas would come to this conclusion, however, they were imprisoned, killed, and exiled.

BLA members continued their revolutionary commitment after being imprisoned and several were able to escape or attempt escape:

BLA member John Andalewa Clark was killed in 1976 at Trenton State Prison in New Jersey, after he and other BLA members fought a battle against armed guards. Clark and his allies were armed with homemade weapons and bombs. The State Police discovered a van parked a few blocks from the prison that was loaded with weapons and camping supplies.

A BLA member was killed in a fall from a high-rise prison in New York, after another prisoner had descended on the same rope.

BLA member Herman Bell was overpowered after holding a guard hostage while attempting to escape from Rikers Island prison in New York. A rubber raft and other gear were discovered outside of his building.

Russell Maroon Shoatz and three other BLA members escaped in 1977 from the State Prison at Huntingdon, PA. Two of these brothers were recaptured and BLA member Wayne Musa Henderson was killed. Maroon was recaptured after a twenty-seven-day hunt.

qualitative development) by the group's unwillingness to become actively involved in the civil rights struggle, where most of the action was taking place. Members of the Fruit of Islam were not much better than department-store security guards, far removed from the reality of "total war." Subsequent events would expose its weaknesses.

To its credit, however, the Fruit of Islam had perfected a method of recruiting, organizing, and training (to the extent that training was done) that is unparalleled to this day. The secret of its success rested on the fact that it concentrated its main recruiting efforts among the most downtrodden segments of the Black community: the drug addicts, prison inmates, prostitutes, and destitute poor. It took a great effort to recruit and organize these people, but once they were fully brought into the organization they became steadfast and loyal members of their new (psychological) family. By the time the Nation of Islam had "fished" them out of the mud, they had no other family that would stand by them, as they had burnt their bridges well. These recruits were kept under extremely close supervision and were always provided with the means to acquire food, clothing, shelter, security, and entertainment (which was usually social fellowship in religious trappings). The Fruit of Islam provided everything that a functioning family would provide its members.

The organization itself had a nationalist-sounding program but no grand strategy to achieve any of its ends. The first dictum of war, "war is a matter of vital importance to the state . . . and it is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied" (Sun Tzu) was not observed. This statement is not just a matter of opinion—events have proven this to be true. It does not take long to build military capability. Of course, the organization has not had a free ride, as it continues to fight the government's infiltration and manipulation in addition to the petty jealousies and rivalries that exist among leaders. Nevertheless, it is clear that with a few exceptions, the Fruit of Islam has thus far missed the boat when it comes to being an important Black fighting formation.

The civil rights movement was launched in 1955 with the Montgomery bus boycott and quickly spread throughout the South. In addition to many

local groupings, which in some cases had already been active in their communities, a number of other organizations began to emerge on the national scene by 1960: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Urban League, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been around since the early 1900s. From 1955 to 1965, all of the major actions taking place in the Black freedom struggle occurred in the South, and the aforementioned organization led these struggles. Each of these organizations professed nonviolence as their strategy, but ultimately relied on someone else's armed force to protect them, usually that of the U.S. government (with disastrous results). These groups would call ahead to the FBI and alert them to their plans, requesting protection. The FBI, in turn, would contact members of the local police force, who were often card-carrying Ku Klux Klansmen, or it would contact their undercover agents/operatives in the Klan who would subsequently organize a shooting, burning, bombing, or killing. These organizations were violating every rule in the "art of war." Instead of observing the rule "destroy your enemy and preserve yourself," they were actually aiding their enemy in their own destruction. This exact pattern was repeated, to one degree or another, when the government provided U.S. Marshals or federal troops. Despite this short-sighted, cowardly, and disastrous strategy, because of the heroic sacrifices made by the rank-and-file (largely Black men, women, and children) a number of changes were forced through during this period of time. And these groups did, albeit belatedly, give rise to a few armed fighting subdivisions and offshoots.

The Monroe County, North Carolina NAACP branch was headed by a Black man named Robert F. Williams who saw early on that his chapter of the NAACP would suffer countless casualties and could not survive unless they got rid of the nonviolent approach and adopted an armed self-defense strategy. This brother strongly advocated that all Blacks in the United States should adopt armed self-defense.

Williams walked his talk as his Monroe Country NAACP branch was both armed and trained. Because of this, its members survived a number

wasting energy, learning from the mistakes of others and one's own, not repeating them, and emulating the successes of others whenever possible.

This new phase had not been solidly launched—rather it was launched in an unprofessional manner. Adequate time was not taken to evaluate where the movement had been, where it was at, and where it was going. After finally adopting the right style, it lost contact with the substance of what the struggle was all about. "War is an extension of politics"; it is "politics by different means." It follows that the military wing had to take its cue from whatever was happening in the political arena, as the Deacons had done. But it was not to be. The BLA groups were busy acquiring and consolidating their logistical base (raiding banks, gun stores, acquiring transportation, safe houses, etc.) and this was understandable and proper. At the same time they were launching deadly attacks on the police, and since these were planned assaults they were much more successful than the old BPP shootouts. Usually these attacks were carried out so swiftly that when the smoke had cleared the cops were either dead or wounded and the guerrillas had disappeared. They had learned how to reverse the killed and wounded ratio. Once again, they should have been operating this way from the beginning. They still suffered casualties from the rare operations that resulted in a running gunfight, when they were subjected to car stops, and when they were forced into confrontations. The casualties in these situations were devastating because the BLA did not have an adequate political apparatus to replenish their forces, nor did they understand the necessity to integrate local street gangs into their activities.

The BLA became the top priority of the special FBI/local police task forces. To a great degree, BLA guerrilla groups did not fall victim to being infiltrated by agents. If they had not been caught off balance, they would have had to make some other mistake to give these task forces an advantage, such as increased surveillance. The BLA fielded the most effective Black assault units since the maroons! Their primary weakness, and the situation which caused them the most harm, was their failure to properly integrate themselves with the Black masses and their inability to interact with aboveground revolutionary political



leadership clique. Robert Webb was a top Panther leader and bodyguard of Newton. It was his words at a New York meeting, attended by disgruntled Panthers from all over the country, that were the most damaging to the West Coast leadership. Allegations of opulence (penthouses, limousines, etc.), pimping BPP female members, and cocaine addiction were raised. The following day, the main West Coast representative, central committee member Samuel Napier, was found dead in a burned-out office. He had been tied to a chair and riddled with bullets. Shortly thereafter, the West Coast delegation placed themselves under police protection until they could make arrangements to return to California! The word went out that the police were looking for a number of people in connection with the shooting and the previously held meeting and this forced many to go underground. Although the Panthers should have been prepared for a situation like this, sadly they were not. Once again, the dictums of *The Art of War* were ignored. While some tried to adhere to them, too many others were still running their operations and actions in a haphazard and shortsighted manner.

This unfortunate situation did swell the ranks of the guerrillas considerably, however. Intensive training was undertaken by these new guerrillas. They raided banks for funds and gun stores for arms and ammunition. Once again, this should have been a new beginning, but because the situation was forced on them as a result of the actions of older BPP members, aboveground political work and activity was all but destroyed. The same mistake that the civil rights movement had made was revisited upon the BPP: Both had put too much stock in one facet of the resistance. With the civil rights movement there was too much focus on political work and not nearly enough on military components, and with the guerrilla groups it was just the opposite. It was not clear to either of these groups that professionals must lead revolutions if destruction is to be avoided.

One may not be professional from the start, but it's imperative that professionalism be acquired as soon as is possible. The hallmark of the professional is the ability to proceed from point A to point B without

of shootouts with the local KKK (citizens and police). Unfortunately, he could not affect any widespread acceptance of his methods and his chapter was therefore isolated. After a so-called kidnapping of some white people, he was forced to leave the country.<sup>3</sup> He continued his work while in exile by traveling throughout Africa and visiting China in an attempt to raise support for the struggle in the United States. He became a nationalist and published a paper called *The Liberator* in which he advocated the overthrow of the United States through guerrilla warfare. After a number of years, he was able to return to the United States as head of the revolutionary group, Republic of New Africa (RNA). He avoided prison, as RNA was able to expose and squash the trumped-up kidnapping charge.

At the same time, an organization called "Deacons for Defense and Justice" was formed in both rural Alabama and Mississippi. Unlike Williams's Monroe County chapter, the Deacons for Defense and Justice was not a subdivision of the NAACP. Rather, it was an offshoot, and therefore autonomous, from the national nonviolent leadership. The Deacons recruited, organized, and trained solely from this perspective. Because of this, they were more sophisticated than any other part-time militant Black organization during the civil rights struggle. For instance, the Deacons provided a tightly organized security and communications net around some of the most important civil rights marches. While the civil rights groups provided their posted marshals with armbands, the Deacons had roving patrols armed with automatic rifles. After a few skirmishes and firefights with Klan and Night Riders (part-time Klan who were afraid to show their faces during the day), they gave the Deacons a wide berth. Ultimately, however, the Deacons had a circumscribed potential for growth due to the civil rights movement's overall strategy of reliance on the U.S. government for protection.

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3 Editors' note: The details about this complex and unfortunate frame-up cannot be detailed in full here. Readers are encouraged to investigate this further in the *Robert and Mabel Williams Resource Guide* (San Francisco: Freedom Archives, 2005) and in *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* by Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Rural Mississippi had also made believers out of the young SNCC cadre. SNCC had started its “Mississippi Freedom Summer” campaign in 1964 as nonviolent activists. After experiencing the death of several of their comrades and supporters and the raw terror that the police and Klan/Night Riders inspired, all of the SNCC cadre had armed themselves by the time they left Mississippi. SNCC leader H. Rap Brown was arrested when a rifle and banana clips were found in his luggage after a flight from Mississippi. SNCC eventually changed its name to the “Student National Coordinating Committee,” dropping the “Nonviolent” description. Yet it was too little, too late, as the momentum was already shifting to the cities of the North and the West. SNCC’s last effort in 1965 was to organize the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, whose emblem was a black panther (with no direct association to the Black Panther Party founded in October 1966). The Lowndes Country Freedom Organization adopted armed self-defense from the beginning. Although they experimented with the slogan “Black Power,” they did not make any far-reaching progress, as their political goal was still “civil rights.”

The 1965 Watts rebellion in California was the signal that the momentum in the Black struggle was shifting to the cities. Within two years, a number of rebellions occurred in other major cities and small towns. This was a qualitatively different situation. Rather than peaceful demonstrators seeking to acquire “civil rights,” these events were massive and widespread rebellions (Watts: thirty-four dead; New York, Philadelphia, Birmingham, and Newark: twenty-six dead; Detroit: forty-three dead. And in each case there were hundreds wounded, with massive property damage). The keen political observer could not miss the parallels between these rebellions and those that had preceded revolutions and armed struggles in other countries. But guess what was missing from this equation? No urban-based Black political groups had armed components.<sup>4</sup> There were no Black fighting formations to organize, control, and direct these rebellions. The

4 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the NACCD*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968, 19–21.

At this point, other Panther leaders started speaking against Newton more strongly. Eldridge Cleaver (who had been feuding with Newton from Algeria) stated emphatically that it was time to stop bullshitting and that the armed struggle needed to be fully supported. He made arrangements with the Algerian government for Panthers and others to come to Algeria for military training. Similarly, Field Marshall George Jackson continued to advocate and write about the necessity for a similar shift in the struggle and how it needed to be carried out. He unquestionably would have been the most effective leader to implement this new strategy because of his superior theories, his desire to implement them, his desperation (at the time he was preparing to go to trial for the killing of a prison guard), and most importantly because of the widespread respect and admiration he received from others.

It would not have been difficult to “liberate” him from prison, provided that the BPP put its full resources behind the effort. There was no lack of BPP members, female and male, who would have volunteered for such an honored mission. Sadly, the West Coast leadership of Newton and company, along with the police and prison establishments, had cut him off from direct contact with those who were ready, willing, and able to carry it out. Consequently, he was set up by these establishments and was assassinated—though not before Jackson and his prison “Black Guerrilla Family” killed five of the enemy. Magee had recovered from his court-house wounds and was in the battle as well.<sup>9</sup> August 21, 1971, the date of Jackson’s death, was a sad day. After his memorial, Attica exploded and the battle ended with forty-three deaths. Black guerrillas walked into a California police station, killed a sergeant and shot up the station. The George L. Jackson Assault Team of the BLA took credit for that act.

The question of the “split” on policy and strategy was solved after a force dispatched by Newton shot and killed Robert Webb when he revealed unfavorable details about the inner workings of the West Coast

9 Eric Mann, *Comrade George: An Investigation into the Official Story of His Assassination* (Cambridge, MA: Hovey Street Press, 1972.)



resistance and other leaders who advocated taking armed struggle out of the movement altogether. The latter group was moving backward and did not recognize that the lessons learned from Philadelphia were crystal clear: police were killed and wounded while the Panthers were released from prison and there were no Panther casualties. There was also heightened community support and participation. A few weeks after the Philadelphia incident, BPP members held a major convention in the city without any police interference. The convention was also held despite police intelligence sources within the BPP correctly informing their superiors that the guerrillas accused of the raids had been regularly seen at BPP offices and that one of them, Robert Saeed Joyner, was there every day. The Black community could clearly see a tenuous separation between those who were participating in planned assaults (the guerrillas) and the BPP political workers. It was also clear that there was no reason to suspend armed action and it was probably too late to do so.

Beyond the disagreements and splits over the issue of arms in the struggle, there were numerous complaints about the new “opulent” lifestyle that various leaders of the BPP had adopted. After his release from prison in 1970, Huey Newton hung out with Hollywood stars and rented expensive apartments. Despite disgust and anger over these developments, the real beef was with the poor strategy that continued to get members killed and imprisoned. Newton, who was still the top leader, advocated no guns. For those who wanted to fight or who were underground, he sent an open communiqué to the North Vietnamese government that he would make one thousand BPP members available to fight in Vietnam against U.S. forces. This was very odd to say the least. Of course the Panthers were highly supportive of the Viet Cong’s fight, but very few could see any reason why they should not show their support by stepping up armed action within the United States rather than offer to fight on foreign ground. The Vietnamese government was of a similar opinion. It openly declined the offer and suggested that the BPP could better help by supporting them from within the United States.

Fruit of Islam was clearly not up to the job because they had not been able to properly respond to the killings and shootings of their members by the local police. Nor could the rural-based groups lend any support, as they were still involved in life-and-death struggles with the Klan and southern police. SNCC made a half-hearted attempt to transfer their operations to urban areas. However, besides H. Rap Brown and a few others, it seemed that after their southern experience SNCC was scared off.

The urban rebellions brought forth scores of new political formations and these formations generally adhered theoretically to the idea of armed self-defense. Along with this shift in tactics came the new nationalist (sounding) politics, which were usually of a separatist bent—although the rediscovery of pan-Africanism began to occur as well. Unfortunately these new formations adopted the “high profile” strategy of the civil rights movement, which brought excessive media coverage. In reality, these organizations were no longer part of the civil rights movement and were now involved in the “Black liberation struggle.” The civil rights people needed this type of exposure to get their message across and to help protect them against the most flagrant abuses. The Black liberation struggle, however, demanded a more clandestine way of handling affairs. It had to prepare for a guerrilla war and to take on this preparation in secret.

This fact was lost on the new, younger organizations. They were impressed by Malcolm X and the fiery orators but did not realize that Malcolm X had served as a motivator and educator. They did not understand that they were embarking on a new phase that demanded quiet, patient organizing and training. The tens of thousands of potential recruits were already showing, through the massive rebellions, that they were already sufficiently stimulated and were waiting for someone to show them how to get the job done. (“Rattling a sword makes a lot of noise . . . drawing one is silent.”) There was still a good deal of agitation, propaganda, and education that needed to be done, but not by those who saw their mission as forming Black fighting formations. This mistake was usually made because these groups tried to combine the activities of the military and political workers in the same cadre. They did not realize that

the situation demanded specialization: both political workers (motivators, educators, marchers, etc.) and military workers (armed self-defense and assault units). The Deacons had had it right!

An outstanding practitioner of this new form of resistance was the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) which began an intensive organizing campaign in the Northeastern states in 1966 and 1967. Much of its activity was centered in Philadelphia. RAM was militant, nationalist, and high profile. Its cadre spray-painted "Join the Black Guard" slogan on walls in the communities. (The Black Guard was their public military arm). RAM's leaders were in front of the cameras on all the important issues and the Black Guard cadre could often be seen at their "cultural centers," wearing fatigues and black berets. The sisters and brothers in RAM's youth group, "The Liberators," dressed in black with black berets. These activities helped members of the Black community feel good and believe that revolution was right around the corner. (Ironically, no one in Philadelphia had heard of the similar group, which began in California, known as the Black Panther Party for Defense and Justice.) RAM's activity scared white folks, especially because some members of RAM went out of their way to ensure this. They reasoned that they had been kept down long enough and it was time to strike back!

Unfortunately in 1967 the white establishment struck back too, and over a period of months H. Rap Brown and other leaders and key cadre were arrested. While RAM advocated self-defense and owned weapons, its members did not carry them in public. Consequently, they were arrested for everything from jaywalking to conspiring to put cyanide in police department rations at a major holiday celebration.<sup>5</sup> RAM had not fired a shot, however some alleged members and supporters were arrested bringing dynamite back from Canada (allegedly to blow up the Statue of Liberty!).

5 Maxwell C. Stanford/Akbar Muhammad Ahmed, "Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement," Master's Thesis, Atlanta: Atlanta University, 1986.

A major stumbling block in the launching of this new phase was the growing unrest among the rank-and-file because of the leadership's belated effort to deal with these problems. Despite this, the "new phase" was launched with the BPP cadres studying texts on guerrilla warfare, refusing to be arrested for any reason, and launching planned attacks on various targets. In New York City, a gun battle broke out between the police and BPP members after an attempted arrest for carrying concealed weapons. When the smoke had cleared, a cop was dead along with BPP member Harold Russell. Two other BPP members, Robert Ra'uf Vickers and Anthony Kimu White, were wounded and Kimu was arrested. Ra'uf escaped and went underground where doctors helped him heal his wounds. He was then able to return to the field. In California, Geronimo ji-Jaga Pratt was out on bail in connection with the 1969 gun battle that resulted from a police raid on the Los Angeles BPP headquarters. He went underground and formed a guerrilla group. In Philadelphia, a guerrilla group raided a police station, killing one cop and wounding another. BPP guerrilla groups were raiding banks for funds, hijacking food to give to the community, and acquiring sophisticated military weapons.

This intensified activity was bringing the pressure down on the BPP political workers and, after the raid on the Philadelphia police station, the police raided every BPP office in the city. The BPP, however, was ready for them.

After gun battles at two of the offices, the Panthers were forced to surrender. This activity also provoked gun battles between the police and other Blacks. In a forty-eight-hour period the score was: six cops in the hospital with gunshot wounds and one cop in the morgue, Panthers and guerrillas in prison, and other guerrillas on the run. They were learning! All of the Panthers were released because the police could not officially justify the raids in the face of a massive protest from the Black community.

It is unfortunate that groups in the Black liberation struggle did not operate this way from the beginning. The growing awareness on how to attack their problems had not being digested at all by the larger movement, and a split developed between those who advocated the new phase of

Police were being attacked while they sat in their cars or directed traffic. It was war: There were sisters and brothers hijacking passenger jets to Cuba and Algeria, where the BPP had a branch of fugitives headed by Cleaver. (Cleaver had left the country to avoid going back to prison for the Little Bobby Hutton shootout.) All of this was very sobering for BPP members. The early flash and profile was giving way to a desperate search to find a way to regain the initiative and plug the security gaps. Finally, it was decided that what was needed was an autonomous strike force that could handle all of the armed actions while the rest of the BPP would keep up and expand the community programs, such as free breakfast, education, sickle-cell testing, clothing drives, and so forth. In reality, it was again too little, too late.

Most of the mistrust had been instigated by the actions of the agents and their handlers (FBI, police). This was only possible because the youthful leadership had no firm understanding of intelligence and counterintelligence activities or how to combat them. More importantly, they did not have a firm grip on *The Art of War*, which included instructions on how to deal with all that troubled them. Unfortunately there was no turning back. Orders went out to the field marshals to begin organizing a separate guerrilla group known as the “Black Liberation Army.”

A very important piece was missed at this point and that was the recruitment of the street gangs. The BPP had only made a half-hearted attempt to reach them and a lack of experience hindered that effort. The fact of the matter is that the street gangs were only susceptible to a program that included fighting as its main component. The street gangs told the old BPP, who wanted cadres who were both political and military workers, “Come back when you’re ready to fight.” Now the time for fighting had come, but in its haste to begin this new phase, the BPP ignored the gangs again. It must be recognized that events were happening at such a rapid and desperate pace that it was hard to do anything but proceed full steam ahead. Nevertheless, a little foresight would have indicated that there were benefits to thinking a strategy through in a more developed manner.

These arrests crippled RAM and the organization never regained its former vitality. Its leaders and cadres were forced to deal with the trumped-up charges for years afterward. RAM was not the only group facing this scenario, as it was also played out in Black communities around the country. In fact, the FBI—the original coordinators of this attack on RAM—transmitted its results to police forces throughout the country. The government’s success in carrying out this campaign resulted from the fact that all of these groups were inexperienced. They were never given the time to get grounded after they publicly demonstrated their militancy. These Black fighting formations never had the chance to fight and many of their members became discouraged after such experiences, turning to crime and/or drugs.

The situation with the Black Panther Party for Defense and Justice (BPP) was somewhat different. This group, founded 1966 in Oakland, followed the same pattern as RAM, but it had an advantage. There was a clause in the California State law that allowed citizens to carry arms in public as long as they were not loaded. The BPP took full advantage of this clause in order to brandish weapons wherever they went. At that time, this seemed to be the height of militancy and they received more attention than any other group from the community, media, and police. Despite this attention, they could not be dealt with as easily as RAM because RAM always carried loaded weapons. After a few confrontations with the police it became apparent that the police could not bluff or intimidate these young Blacks. Because of this, BPP members were provoked into gun battles with the police and, within a year, cofounder Huey Newton had been shot and was imprisoned for killing the cop who shot him. “Little” Bobby Hutton was the first BPP member to be killed after two carloads of Panthers were ambushed by the police. Others were wounded and jailed. Bobby Seale, the other cofounder, had been jailed for marching into the state capital with other Panthers to protest a new law which prohibited carrying guns in public. The top three leaders, Newton, Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver (who was captured after the shootout with the police in which Hutton was killed) were all in prison, along with other key leaders and cadre.



There was a positive side to all of this, however—membership in the BPP skyrocketed! Chapters were formed up and down the West Coast, in the Midwest, Northeast, and South. The BPP became a magnet that attracted most of the smaller local organizations which were of a similar mindset. Additionally, the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 inspired even greater numbers to join. At this time the BPP was not carrying guns in public and yet the police onslaught continued. BPP offices and homes of Panthers were raided from coast to coast. Police agents infiltrated their ranks, provoked deadly confrontations with local police, and instigated rivalries with other Black organizations. BPP members were actually hunting and killing each other because of these agent-provocateurs. The Panthers were a potentially strong Black fighting formation but they were forced to take to the streets before they were ready. (“The field of battle is a land of standing corpses.”) Panthers were dying in the streets, in raids, and in prison (Soledad, San Quentin, Attica, and Atmore-Holman to name but a few). It was a “war to the knife!”<sup>6</sup>

The Panthers were not the only Black fighting formation. There were other revolutionaries and “free shooters” who were every bit as committed, armed, and involved in the Black liberation struggle. Examples of these others include:

Fred Ahmad Evans and his squad of Black guerrillas who were able to trap the Cleveland, Ohio, police in a deadly ambush in which a number of police were wounded and killed. Some guerrillas were unfortunately killed as well and others were wounded, while Evans was imprisoned. He later died in prison. In response to the ambush the police demanded more men and guns and displayed a .50 caliber heavy machine gun that had raked their squad cars.

Mark Essex, a “free shooter,” held off an army of police atop a high-rise hotel in Louisiana and inflicted many casualties. A helicopter gunship had to be called in to kill him.

6 George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1990).

Jonathan Jackson, who walked into a courtroom in San Rafael, CA, and pulled out a submachine gun from his duffel bag, disarmed all of the sheriffs (and gave pistols and shotguns to James McClain, William Christmas, and Ruchell Cinque Magee, who were comrades of his brother George Jackson). They rounded up the white judge, district attorney, and a number of jurors as hostages. After forcing their way past the rest of the sheriffs and other police, their get-away van was riddled with bullets, killing Jackson, McClain, and Christmas. Magee was wounded but survived. Before they died, they shot the judge in the head with the shotgun they had taped under his chin. The DA and a juror were also shot, but survived. Jonathan Jackson’s brother George was a field marshal in the BPP and was killed the following year in San Quentin, although not before he was able to kill three prison guards and two inmate snitches. As it turned out, all of these brothers were set up by agent-provocateur Louis Tackwood, who had married one of their sisters!<sup>7</sup>

The revolutionary Republic of New Africa (RNA) that Robert F. Williams once headed, gunned down a number of Detroit police after they tried to storm a meeting RNA’s leaders were holding out in a church. A few years later they killed a sheriff after their headquarters was raided in Jackson, Mississippi. That raid sent their entire leadership to prison.<sup>8</sup>

“Free shooters” killed police in sniper attacks in projects in Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, and New Orleans.

H. Rap Brown became a fugitive after a bomb in his comrade’s car went off outside of a court building. A year or so later he was wounded and captured after a gun battle between his “liberators” from East St. Louis and the police in New York City. A number of the liberators were captured.

7 See Gregory Armstrong, *The Dragon Has Come* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), and Paul Liberator, *The Road to Hell* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996).

8 See: Imari Abubakari Ohadele/Milton Henry, *Free the Land!* (Washington, DC: House of Songhay, 1984.)